

LAIRD SAYS SOVIET CAN LEAD BY 2 TO 1 IN MISSILES BY '75

Russians Can Surpass U.S.
in All Arms, He Asserts
in Plea for Safeguard

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WASHINGTON, April 25 — Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird asserted today that if the Soviet Union continued the pace of its missile buildup it could have 2,500 long-range missiles by 1975. The United States now has 1,054, and does not plan to increase the force in the next five years.

"Based upon the best information available to me as Secretary of Defense," he said, "I must conclude that the Soviet Union has the capability of achieving by the mid-nineteen-seventies a superiority over the presently authorized and programmed forces of the United States in all areas—offensive strategic forces, defensive forces and conventional forces."

In a speech prepared for a meeting of the United Press International Florida Newspaper Editors Association in Panama City, Fla., and released here, Mr. Laird used his gloomy projection of a growing potential threat to underscore his plea for the Administration's Safeguard antimissile program.

'Minimal Step Necessary'

"The Safeguard System is the minimal step necessary at this time to ensure that the safety and security of the American people will be preserved if arms limitations talks are not successful in the coming months and years," he said.

The proposed \$6-billion to \$7 billion Safeguard program is encountering determined opposition in Congress.

Many argue, Mr. Laird said, that Russia will not maintain its present level of defense activity. But such arguments are based primarily on guess-

work, he said.

"This could lead to a major and irretrievable miscalculation if our judgment on intentions proves faulty," he declared.

Assumption Called False

By way of example, he said that last year the "dominant official assumption" by the Johnson Administration was that Russia "by now would have begun to slow down and halt the expansion of its C.B.M. [intercontinental ballistic missile] force."

"That assumption proved false," he said.

At present, Mr. Laird said, the Soviet Union has 1,000 long-range missiles in "hardened," or protected, silos and 140 older missiles sitting on launching pads. The United States has 1,054 intercontinental missiles.

Although he did not say so it was apparent that his pro-

Continued on Page 17, Column

Continued From Page 1, Col. 6

jection assumed that the Russians would continue into the middle of the next decade their present deployment rate of about 250 long-range missiles a year.

In the late nineteen-fifties and continuing into the 1960 Presidential race, some argued that if the Russians built long-range missiles as fast as the United States believed they were capable of doing, the United States would quickly and dangerously fall behind.

Later, U-2 reconnaissance photos showed that the Russians had actually built only a small number of missiles.

Delay Called Risky

Mr. Laird attempted to head off a line of argument based on this by asserting that since it takes five years or more before a defensive system to answer a potential offensive threat becomes operational, the United States could not afford to delay deploying Safeguard.

"We cannot gamble on estimates of Soviet intentions," he declared. "If the Soviet Union is developing a capability that could endanger this nation, we must be prepared to counteract it."

The Defense Secretary said that the Russians had built seven Polaris-type submarines, armed with 16 missiles each, and that if they continued their current production pace they could outstrip the United States, which has 41 Polaris submarines, by the mid-nineteen-seventies.

While multiple warheads planned for United States missiles would swing the nuclear arithmetic back into the American column, he noted, the Russians are working hard on multiple warheads and may be able to match the United States qualitative improvements.

"Most of us still remember vividly a moment of supreme national peril in 1962," he said. "It was widely assumed then that the Soviet Union would never install offensive missiles in Cuba, and this presumption prevailed right up to the time that photographic evidence proved it wrong."

"As Secretary of Defense," he continued, "I do not intend for this country to go through that kind of crisis again, but if we must, I intend to see that the United States is in a position to meet such a crisis successfully."